



Viewpoint

‘The Gentle Art of Letting the Other Fellow Have Your Own Way’¹: Viewpoints on a media narrative used to promote the proposed N2 toll road

Katie Farrington
Kate Davies
Rhodes University, South Africa

Abstract

This viewpoint paper is written in response to a South African National Roads Agency (SANRAL) advertorial published in various South African regional newspapers in February 2004. We highlight the importance of developing ‘media literacy’ – reading skills which enable the critical deconstruction of media texts. We explore, more specifically, the public relations strategies used by large corporations, and the media’s role as disseminators of corporate marketing material. We also look at the relevance in identifying the language and discourse positioning the writer, photographer, reader and their choice representative medium.

Introduction

As media consumers we are exposed to ever increasing volumes of visual and non-visual information that compete for our attention. The regional and global dissemination of messages in a mass-mediated world makes it important to become evermore discerning readers of the messages that we willingly and unwillingly select and interpret. We need not only develop the skills to identify narratives that are embedded in media messages, but also to become aware of the different cultural constructions that are reflected in them. As Wigston (2001) points out, narratives are informed by the author’s distinct and various purposes that emerge from and reflect specific economic, social and political contexts. In the same way, we are positioned with similar constructions that are particular to us as readers, and that inform our interpretations of messages in the media.

Our intention in this paper is to explore how the multi-layered public relations messages of a large corporation are constructed and communicated through the written and visual narratives in a media text. To do so, we use insights from media theory, notably the works of Hall (1997) and Richter (1998). We first examine the historical context, and then briefly review the relevant literature on media studies, and we also look at the construction of the advertorial and the language and discourse used in its production. Thirdly, we look at the politics of media narratives, and the different roles that are assumed by the participants involved.

The literature on public relations strategies reveals how the media can be used as a mouthpiece by large corporations – an example of this is the public relations strategy used by Nestlé in the 1970s, described in length by Richter (1998). We suggest that ever-increasing

critical engagement is required when evaluating media narratives, particularly in their role as carriers of marketing material. Our interest in this paper is to highlight how language and discourse are underpinned by specific cultural and social contexts, and to investigate their influences on how messages are communicated and interpreted (Hall, 1997:10), reflecting our educational interest, as many messages are communicated and interpreted in/through educational processes.

A lecture on reading media narratives during a recent departmental seminar inspired us to deconstruct an advertorial on the much publicised proposed N2 toll road through Pondoland in the Eastern Cape. This full page advertorial was placed by SANRAL. It was 'disguised' as editorial copy and appeared in several prominent South African daily newspapers, including the *Cape Times*, *The Natal Mercury*, *Pretoria News* and *The Star*, on 27 February, 2004. It purports to report objectively on the road agency's decision, based on 'informed' social, economic and ecological consideration, to build a toll road through Pondoland. This area has a high biodiversity sensitivity, and is an internationally recognised 'biological hotspot'. It is also located in one of South Africa's poorest provinces, the Eastern Cape, where local communities are in desperate need of economic development.

Historical Context

In order to understand the text we need to explain its historical context. In the 1990s, the Department of Trade and Industry earmarked the Pondoland section of the Wild Coast as a spatial development node. Since then, there has been ongoing, contentious and often acrimonious debate and lobbying between the many different stakeholders about what type of development would be most appropriate to develop the area. The most recent arguments have centred around proposals for a toll road and the dune mining of titanium (WWF, 2003; Groenewald, 2004; McKenzie, 2004). In December 2003, the record of decision (ROD) for the construction of the road was finally approved. The Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism was required to uphold, amend or reject it. In view of the numerous appeals against the ROD, the minister appointed a committee to review the objections. Judging by the direction that the advertorial takes, we suggest that SANRAL quite deliberately undertook a nation-wide media campaign in early 2004 in order to canvass public approval for a project in which the company had considerable vested financial and business interests. The advertorial from the *Cape Times*, being reviewed here, forms part of this public relations initiative.

Public Relations Strategies and the SANRAL Advertorial

Advertorials are loosely defined as a combination of advert and editorial content, often used by large corporations to assert their point of view while subtly persuading the readership of their good intentions. Generally speaking, profit-driven corporations are required to constantly seek to enhance their operating environments and they achieve this by using the media to influence public opinion while appearing to fulfill certain social obligations (Richter, 1998:4). Oppositional pressure groups are unable to match the financial muscle with which corporations

market themselves and their products using the medium of newspapers. In her paper on Corporate PR Strategies, Richter cites an opinion on the role of public relations, made by the Mobil Oil Public Relations executive, 'The point [of Public Relations] is getting people to behave the way you hope they will behave by persuading them that it is ultimately in their interest to do so.' (Richter, 1998:2).

Apart from using the media to further their particular business interests, large corporations often seek to create dialogue between themselves and oppositional pressure groups as a way of steering clear of the typically combative interactions that normally occur between the two groups. Emotionally charged boycotts and protests are best avoided by corporations by convincing citizen groups that they have taken the right steps to 'create an image of socially-concerned business' (Richter, 1998:2). This means that when the corporations are held accountable for their actions in a public forum such as the media, they are well prepared and protest action is often either negated or rendered ineffectual.

Manipulative public relation tactics on the part of the corporation need to be examined carefully by individuals and citizen groups if they are to be effective resisters, whether participating in dialogue or not. In the advertorial in question, SANRAL claims that the inland route alignment of the road was established 'in discussion' with South African National Parks and the Wild Life and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA). According to Cathy Kay, the Conservation Director of WESSA, this was not the case (Kay, 2004, pers. comm.). SANRAL does not want to be portrayed as confrontational, but those who have followed the debate over the past two years will know of the heated exchanges that have gone on between WESSA and the road planners.

Announcing a voluntary code of ethics is another PR strategy that Richter makes reference to (Richter, 1998:9). In the SANRAL advertorial, the CEO commented that the company could have gone ahead with the project before 1997 when environmental legislation was less rigorous but they chose not to because they 'value input from all stakeholders'. Of course it is the extent to which they 'value' and act on this input that matters the most.

Richter (1998:2) further states that as a public relations strategy, corporations often bolster their public image of corporate philanthropy by creating an image of being socially concerned and engaged. SANRAL claims that their '... good corporate citizenship extends far beyond the company's operations and includes reaching out with practical assistance into communities,... touching the lives of every citizen... The company values input from all stakeholders... and is proudly South African.' To appease the 'green fringe,' SANRAL notes that it is a 'corporate sponsor of Birdlife South Africa' and they state that they 'are planning a comprehensive environmental education programme at strategic points along our roads'.

The Content of the Advertorial

A small heading at the top of the newspaper page introduces the advertorial as a 'Special Survey' and then the reader is struck by the bold statement: 'N2, The Route of Least Disturbance.' Interspersed in the text and contributing to the formal layout of the page are four colour photographs. The central photograph is of a six-lane dual carriageway leading to a city in the

distance. Underneath it is a smaller photograph of a nursery with plants in black plastic bags – a projection of what will be done to accommodate the indigenous plants removed during the construction of the road. The explanatory caption states that, 'Both the Botanical garden and the proposed Pondoland Park will greatly increase tourism and consequent inflow of foreign exchange into the region.' A third photograph shows a wide, flat road passing through a eucalyptus plantation and connecting to the positive image of trees, bearing the caption, 'On the right road'. The fourth picture is of the CEO of SANRAL, Mr Nazir Alli (discussed later). (Due to copyright restrictions we are unable to publish the photographs, but readers are referred to the original advertorial published in February 2004.)

Language and Discourse

Using content analysis as a tool to interpret the meaning(s) of the messages we read, we need to recognise the variety of motivations that lie behind the diverse perspectives of writers, illustrators and photographers and their choice of medium. Obviously, a journalist writing for *Business Day*, for example, is highly unlikely to be working within the same discourse as a journalist writing for *Enviro-Teach*, or a dramatist representing a political theme in a theatre production. The various media are not only disseminating information within different business, environmental/educational, and political contexts and languages, but they also give meaning to their language using disparate approaches (Hall, 1997:5). In this light, the text must be viewed in terms of the context of the author, who the author is representing (in this instance the corporation), and the medium (regional newspapers) in which it is being made available for public consumption.

We are able to analyse the visual elements in a text using the similar tools of deconstruction as those used when analysing written narratives. According to Hall (1997), there are two separate components we rely upon when we make meaning of a narrative. Language acts as a vehicle, allowing meaning to be transmitted, and discourse considers the effects and consequences of the representation, relating to power, its influences on behaviour and the construction of identities. We consider both of these elements in our analysis of the written and visual texts found in the advertorial. The written narrative and the images complement each other to communicate not only the explicit message but also the discourse within which the advertorial is structured and framed. The inferred messages found in the photographs and accompanying text are analysed with reference to the corporation they are representing and the ideology it seeks to uphold, whether intentionally or implicitly.

Wells (1997) recognises photography's powerful ability to sell products and ideology, but the marketing strategy, she says, often does not recognise or acknowledge the contested production methods and processes that occur while making the product. This is problematic when, for instance, a perfume advertisement articulates passion and femininity as its ideology but, for obvious reasons, fails to mention the experiments performed on animals that may have occurred or the bad labour practices in which the company is embroiled, as it would not be helpful in selling their product (Wells, 1997:157).

SANRAL has marketed its proposed development carefully, using the same techniques. The photographs tell a convincing story of the heroism of SANRAL, but they fail to acknowledge

the latent social and environmental damage that will take place while they sell their ideology of a better life for everyone. A reader might interpret the photograph of the road running through the eucalyptus plantation as SANRAL's intention to develop forestry as a commercial venture. What the photographs fail to mention is the impact this alien, water-thirsty monocrop will have on the highly threatened Pondoland centre of endemism. The future of the people likely to be displaced by the proposed development is also deliberately negated by the careful selection of visual imagery.

The Public Face of SANRAL

One photograph in particular coherently sums up the way in which SANRAL is portrayed and marketed to the public. This is a photograph of the CEO of SANRAL and is the only human element visually represented in the advertorial. In the photograph, the CEO flatteringly has sunlight catching the side of his hair and he has a charming, trustworthy yet businesslike smile. He is introduced as Mr Nazir Alli, the CEO of the SA National Roads Agency Ltd, and he, and therefore corporation, is associated (explicitly and implicitly) with business as well as social prowess. With this introduction, how can one not take him seriously? This is the man chosen to represent SANRAL and at the risk of appearing cynical, we suggest that he may not have been given the same prominence had his skin been any lighter, or if his name didn't clear him as previously disadvantaged. This 'face' may be presented so that the public interprets these political signals and regards the corporation as politically legitimate, professional, reliable, trustworthy, open, honest and 'proudly South African'. Words as messengers and meaning as messages in the advertorial collaborate with the photographs and project a consolidated front which supports the public image of the corporation and appeals to the language and discourse of the readership of the particular medium chosen to carry them (Wells, 1997:157).

Reading 'With the Text'

In reading 'with the text,' we discovered that SANRAL has done meticulous research into the socio-economic needs of the people of Pondoland and the state of the environment. The advertorial suggests that the N2 toll road will provide the best possible solution to the development problems of the region and 'protect the poorest sector of our nation'. Claims that the road will support economic growth by providing employment, entrepreneurial opportunities and skills training and bring foreign exchange from eco-tourism are also made. The road, it is promised, will improve the present infrastructure, provide an efficient trade route and put an end to the present environmental degradation that results from the pressure of human settlement, overgrazing, soil erosion, firewood collection, poaching and illegal developments.

According to the advertorial, SANRAL has made a holistic and informed decision about the road after thorough and laborious preparatory research was conducted for nearly a decade. The company's vision supports the three pillars of sustainable development, seeking to link economic growth, social development and environmental preservation. SANRAL also claim to

have consulted all stakeholders, discussed and reached consensus with South African National Parks (SANPARKS) and WESSA over the routing of the road. Their overall appearance as a corporation is one of transparency, accountability and trustworthiness, having taken the trouble to inform a wide section of the South African public through the national print media. The messages suggest that SANRAL are professionals who have done thorough research, that they are authoritative and that they have sufficient power in knowledge and capital to uplift and empower communities.

Reading 'Against the Text'

We begin to discern what Richter expresses as 'PR camouflage and deception' (1998), when we look at the advertorial more critically. She describes laundering as a frequently employed technique to reproduce PR material as factual articles in the media. While the editorial coverage in the advertorial was indistinguishable from its advertising content, nowhere is there any indication that this is an advertisement. This is a breach of the advertising standards code but might easily go unnoticed by less discerning and critical readers. One could question how this 'slipped through', and was not reported to the Advertising Standards Authority?

In order to interpret narratives, Todorov describes how they are constructed through a linear progression from an equilibrium state, through a disruption and disequilibrium to a new state of equilibrium (Branston & Stafford, 1999). Propp (in Branston & Stafford, 1999) developed a different narrative model using a set of standard character roles including a hero, princess, villain, and magical agent. These models have been used by Kozloff (1992, cited in Wigston, 2001) to analyse the structure of narratives in advertisements and other forms of mass media. Using these descriptors to analyse the SANRAL advertorial, we began to unravel interesting and otherwise unspoken components in the text. According to Todorov, the original social harmony in Pondoland, the halcyon days when people and nature lived peacefully side-by-side, was disrupted by poverty and environmental degradation. The article suggests that SANRAL, and its CEO Nazir Alli, is Propp's proudly South African 'hero', on a quest to save Pondoland, the Cinderella 'princess.' The 'magical agent' which will restore the equilibrium, is sustainable development, which SANRAL claims will be brought about through the construction of the N2 toll road (Lacey, 2000, cited in Wigston, 2001). Propp's 'villains' are the unidentified critics who have questioned SANRAL's motives and who have argued against the road.

Representing Affected Communities

The critics (villains) of the proposed SANRAL development, and therefore of the advertorial, are portrayed as pessimists and *nay sayers* because of their cautionary standpoint. Because the advertorials were so widely distributed in several regional newspapers, their effects on the public are far more profound than a few letters of protest from citizen groups, dissenting voices or unrepresented communities. Clearly, we have come to depend heavily on the media, especially television and the print media, to keep us in touch with global, regional and local events. We do this to such an extent that we rely on remote technology for weather forecasts to

inform us of how hot or cold it is going to be, overlooking our own experience of the local weather. According to Peters (1997), it is through exposure to mass media and the global transmission of information that we simultaneously experience the local and the global. How we experience the local is thus often defined by global circulation of information through mass media. Although some of the benefits of this global diffusion of news are self evident, it also affects and sets limits on the way that the reading and viewing public observe the world. In this study, this pertains to the proposed development of the toll road. The widely dispersed readership may be swayed more by the influential article and the powerful corporation that it represents than by the muted or even unheard opinions and experiences of the people living in the area where the development is to take place (Peters, in Gupta *et al.*, 1997).

By 'denying' the communities directly involved and affected their voice(s), their participation is undermined by the authoritative corporation. The discourse embedded in the narrative of the advertorial lies in its readability, appeal and interpretation by the middle class newspaper-reading public to which it is directed. In this way, it not only undermines the voices of the affected people living in Pondoland, and the potency of their participation, but it also excludes them (through lack of access) from understanding how they are being represented and identified as stakeholders. The advertorial subverts the needs of the rural communities by suggesting that the development will be beneficial and uplifting (based on information gathered from 'experts'), it denies the communities self-representation and leaves communities 'spoken for' and disempowered. From the selection of regional newspapers which carried the advertorial, it is evident that the message is directed at middle class, urban South Africans and not the rural poor. The readership appears to have been carefully chosen through choice of publication, with a discourse which appeals to middle class consumers who are versed in social and environmental issues.

Conclusion

In our analysis of this media narrative, we looked at the author of the text (SANRAL), the reader for whom the message was intended (middle class public), and the socio-cultural influences on the construction of visual and non-visual modes of communication. We considered the way in which the media may be used as a mouthpiece for corporate PR and how this particular advertorial represents the public face of SANRAL as a caring and responsible corporate. We have also discussed the impact that exclusive exposure through the publishing process has on the objectified, passive communities that are represented in it.

On the surface, the discourse in the text reviewed was open and accessible but, through application of various narrative and discourse analysis techniques, we have uncovered some 'evidence' of SANRAL's hidden messages and corporate PR, self-congratulatory and politically correct discourse. At a time when South Africa is committed to economic 'progress' and 'growth' at almost any cost, we need to be constantly wary of projects that are promoted in the media under the guise of sustainable development. Closer and critical inspection may reveal that these projects represent veiled corporate PR attempts at 'letting the other fellow have your own way.'

Notes on the Contributors

Katie Farrington is currently an Environmental Education Masters student at Rhodes University Environmental Education and Sustainability Unit. Her research looks at how learners at a local high school are representing their 'sense of place' in a changing social and cultural environment. She draws largely from social theory and the theory of representation to inform her work. Her background is in photography and fine art. Email: k.farrington@ru.ac.za.

Kate Davies trained as a natural scientist but has spent recent years supporting sustainable agriculture and school and community environmental education projects in the northern parts of the Eastern Cape (former Transkei). She is currently researching the development of environmental education resource materials for faith communities as part of an Environmental Education Masters degree at Rhodes University. Email: kated@intermail.co.za.

Endnote

1 Title phrase by Michael Kunczik, communication scientist (Richter 1998:3).

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